

“Building On Jesus”

Matthew 16:13-28

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The Son of Man

Jesus asks his disciples two questions. First, he asks a general question, a non-threatening question that doesn't put his disciples on the spot. He says,

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13)

That's an interesting question already, because of the phrase the "Son of Man." Many of you know that that is the name Jesus most often uses for himself. He doesn't say, "Who do people say that I am," but "the Son of Man." That phrase is a title from the Old Testament, in places like Job and the Psalms. It's a mysterious phrase that both hides and also helps reveal who Jesus is.

On one hand, the phrase Son of Man is a way of saying "human being." In Hebrew, the term is "ben enosh," or "ben adam," like Adam the first man. Psalm 8 and 144 say,

O LORD, what is man that you care for him,
the son of man that you think of him? (Psalm 144:3)

That's an example of parallelism, where you say one thought in a couple different ways. David is saying in that psalm that "you think of" is the same as "you care for," and that "the son of man" is the same as "man." In that psalm and other passages like it, "son of man" is emphasizing someone's humanity. It's like saying "mortal," and in fact that's how translators often put the term, like when God calls the prophet Ezekiel "son of man." The name appears in the book of Ezekiel over 90 times, and it always is making the same point: the prophet is definitely not God.

The disciples report some different answers people are giving for who Jesus is: They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." (Matthew 16:14) The answers were understandable. They made some sense, because Jesus acted like a prophet, like a new John the Baptist or one of the Old Testament prophets. Great men, but only mortals nonetheless.

But in other places, the Son of Man is a title for the Messiah, God's special messenger from heaven sent to save his people. Listen to how the prophet Daniel uses the phrase:

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

That's someone altogether different, the great authority who shares all the authority of God. He is given everything that belongs only to God himself. When Jesus is on trial for blasphemy, the High Priest asked Jesus if he was "the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus answered him,

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Matthew 26:64)

Jesus was saying he is God in the flesh, the Sinless One, and that he will judge the world at the end of time. The High Priest understood that very well—for him that answer was clear evidence of blasphemy, and it made Jesus deserving of death.

So the first question is asking Jesus' followers to observe. What are people saying? Who is the Son of Man? But now he asks another question.

The most important question

The second question turns out to be the most important question in all of history. Jesus asks his disciples, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" I'll say it again, and make it personal. It's the most important question in history, and it's the most important thing you'll have to answer in your life: Who do you take Jesus to be?

Matthew's Gospel has been moving to this question, and it's the summit of the story so far. The stories about Jesus' teaching, his healings, his casting out demons, his arguments with his opponents have all prepared for the answer to this crucial question. The Greek puts the emphasis on "you" with the question. You could translate it, "But you, who do you say that I am?" Jesus doesn't leave his disciples any wiggle room here; no theoretical answers. It gets up close and personal. It's the most important question in history. And it's the most important question in your life, too.

There comes a time when you have to cast your lot. When you have to decide. When Jesus asks you directly, and it's personal, and there's no getting around it. "But you, who do you say that I am?" Jesus doesn't just want to be fascinating, or inspiring. He isn't satisfied with your admiration. He wants your love, your trust, your soul. Like the old hymn goes,

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.¹

So who do you say he is?

He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

When Peter answered the question, he answered the king of the world—he is both God and human. He is the Son who receives all things from the Father, not "a Christ," or "a Son," but *the* Christ, *the* Son, the only begotten of the Father. Now there are many sons and daughters, lower case, that is children of God by grace. Like John says in the opening of his Gospel,

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (John 1:12-13)

What we receive by God's undeserved kindness, Jesus has by nature. He himself is life, and death has no authority over him. He is God himself among us.

Jesus asks the question outside of Judea.

It's interesting that Jesus didn't ask the question at home in Judea, but in Gentile territory. Why did he go to the trouble of making a trip north? Why not just ask his question back at home? It was to specifically show that Jesus is the Savior for the whole world, and to make it clear to both Jews and Gentiles. So what happened at Caesarea Philippi that day was a promise.

When Jesus asks the question Caesarea Philippi, a city as pluralistic as our world today, it means his truth holds up in the midst of a world of competing claims to truth, a world of lost unbelievers who need him.

Jesus Will Build His church

When Jesus praises Peter for his answer, he says,

¹ Isaac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, 1707.

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hell will not overpower it." (Matthew 16:17-18)

In other words, "I will build my church on the word, on the good news about me that you have just spoken."

Peter's answer shows that the Father has revealed the truth about Jesus to him. Peter couldn't come up with this by himself. Neither can you. If you see Jesus for who he really is, and you trust in him, it's a sign God is already at work in your heart.

"I will build my church" is a big promise, based on the authority of God himself. God's mission in the world doesn't depend on our initiative or wisdom or strength. In the end, it doesn't even depend on our faithfulness. It doesn't depend on you knowing all the answers or going to seminary. It doesn't depend on us being the richest or the best or the biggest or flashiest church.

It depends on one thing. It depends on Jesus' power and wisdom and faithfulness to keep this promise: "I will build my church." Not, "You will build my church." Or, "Missionaries will build my church." or, "Pastors will build my church." But, "*I* will build my church." Jesus is saying he will build his church, and not so much on the foundation of our faith as on him and his faithfulness.

That's why Paul gives this glory to Jesus. In Romans Paul says,

"I will not presume to speak of anything except what *Christ has accomplished* through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed." (Romans 15:18)

Jesus Christ accomplished it. Christ brought about the obedience of the Gentiles. Yes, Christian workers are important. But we are not ultimate. Jesus Christ is ultimate. He says, "*I* will build my church." One missionary plants. Maybe another pastor waters. But Jesus gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). He builds the church. Growing the church is supernatural work, or it's not the church that gets built, but only a club.

So, how does Jesus build his church?

He does it through his death—and ours. He says,

He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. (Matthew 16:21b)

And then,

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

Jesus builds his church wherever his people faithfully show him as God, who died for us, and whenever we follow him in serving, in giving his life for the world. He wants us to go, but in his way, not ours.

That's why Matthew ends his gospel in chapter 28, where Jesus says,

"All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations." (Matthew 28:18-19)

"I have authority to do it," says Jesus, "over all the powers of darkness, over death and hell, over governments and corporations, and I will do it. I will build my church. So go, and I will be with you." Jesus rules earth and heaven, and he says, "I will build my church."

Do you see how it all comes down to Jesus? The Bible tells us,

There is "*one* mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

There is only one way, one truth, one life, Jesus Christ, and *no* one comes to the Father but by him (John 14:6). And,

He who has the Son has life, and he who has not the Son does *not* have life (1 John 5:12).

He is the Son of God, the crucified and risen Redeemer, The Alpha and the Omega, the Bright Morning Star, The Creator of the universe, and every knee will bow to him and confess that Jesus is Lord of all, to the glory of God the Father!

Jesus is asking you, "Who do you say that I am?" And he promises, "I will build my church." He's calling you this morning to be a part of that work. Will you say "yes," and be a part of saving the world? Of building his church?